



Left, Circus Café owners Christel and Colin MacLean pause for a moment in their restaurant. Top, Circus Café's inviting dining room is swathed in red velvet opera curtains, framed turn-of-the-century circus posters and life-sized murals. Above, Chef David Hernandez prepares the restaurant's signature dish, Mojito Chicken. The Circus Café is located at 392 Broadway in Saratoga Springs, serves lunch and dinner seven days a week from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. and can be reached by calling 583-1106 or visiting www.circuscafe.com.

You'll never outgrow this Circus

Broadway restaurant an entertaining experience

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Maybe you've had a bad day at work and just want to go some place where your identity will melt away for a few hours. Maybe you're craving a good quesadilla, washed down with a Caramel Apple Margarita. Or maybe you've decided it's time you made good on that promise to yourself as a kid to run away and join Ringling Brothers.

The particulars don't really matter. Just pick a reason and go: The Circus Café in Saratoga Springs awaits. Once you make your way past the hostess table and realize you've entered a room swathed in red velvet opera curtains, framed turn-of-the-

century circus posters and life-sized murals, you may think you've landed at a cabaret in Berlin or a café in the heart of Prague.

The Circus Café sizzles with personality. First, you'll be escorted to your seat by a server wearing a shirt that declares "I Tame Lions" or "Former Contortionist" or "Trapeze is My Art."

Then you'll notice the menu, a showpiece in itself where there aren't side orders but sideshows; not a dessert menu but a Fun House of Desserts; an eclectic lunch and dinner menu; and a dizzying selection of specialty drinks.

In addition to regular and frozen

Margaritas, Bloody Marys, Pina Coladas and the like, there are Mojitos, Caipirinhas (a Brazilian rum drink), and 17 different kinds of specialty Martinis, from Key Lime to The Vendetta.

A few moments after ordering, a fire-engine-red basket of popcorn is placed on the table. Standard rolls and butter would clearly seem out of place at this café.

The pitch-perfect cacophony of fun is exactly the plan Colin and Christel MacLean had in mind when they opened the Circus Café in 2004.

The former theater producer (Colin) and one-time Wall Street executive (Christel) combined their collective skills and relocated to Saratoga Springs from Manhattan. ►



Above, from left, are the Circus Café's burger, Scorpion Bowl and, for those who make it through the main course with room to spare, the maximum sundae and cotton candy await. Right, the restaurant's tomato basil salmon dish is a menu favorite.



To help execute their concept for the Circus Café, the MacLeans collaborated with Louie Allen and Michael Blau of Adirondack Scenic Inc. Not a detail was overlooked. Elegant crystal chandeliers crafted in Venice were located, as were Byzantine-style stained-glass hanging lamps from Morocco.

Allen managed to track down a collection of European red velvet opera curtains accented with gold fringe. And to liven up the doorway to the kitchen, he and Blau installed a floor-to-ceiling poster of a circus performer galloping through Paris on a white unicorn, the Eiffel tower aglow in the background.

Sparkling, grapefruit-sized ornaments hover above the tables like low-hanging stars, a decorating remedy that was Colin's idea. "The ceilings here are very high," he said, pointing skyward. "The ornaments add dimension."

The finishing decorative touch was provided by a customer who visited that first summer and, as fate would have it, was the former ringmaster for the Amsterdam Circus. The man was so taken with the concept and atmosphere of the restaurant, he ended up writing a newspaper article about his discovery when he returned to The Netherlands. He sent the MacLeans not only a copy of the story, but two vintage posters from the Amsterdam Circus.

For Christel, getting the restaurant rolling was a bit of déjà vu, since she owned and operated Hattie's Restaurant from 1993 to 2001.

"I missed the restaurant business," she said with a smile on a recent Friday evening. "Colin and I are both very social. Every time a customer comes

through the door, it's an opportunity to connect with someone, and we love that."

Squeals of delight suddenly ring out from a table as a platter of Blue Goo is ceremoniously presented to a family for dessert. Colin said the towering mound of blue cotton candy — which is said to bear a striking resemblance to Marge Simpson's hairdo — usually disappears in a matter of seconds.

The Circus Café may be uber kid-friendly, but it's no mom and pop version of a Chuck E. Cheese. Colin said the café draws in a multitude of age groups.

Depending on what night you go, there may be live jazz or an open mike, which runs well past midnight and draws capacity crowds throughout the year.


Christel said the café's menu also runs a spectrum wide enough to accommodate a variety of tastes.

"It's an accessible menu," she said. The offerings range from burgers and comfort food like chicken pot pie to dishes like Chicken Trevi (chicken breast stuffed with mozzarella, sun-dried tomatoes, prosciutto, and spinach) and Shrimp and Chicken Vera Cruz (grilled chicken and shrimp served over Jasmine rice and tossed with a salsa of tomato, onions, jalapeno peppers, cilantro, Tabasco sauce, and lime juice).

Chef Dave Hernandez, a native of Mexico City, has been at the café since it opened. He previously worked at the trendy Olive's in the SoHo district of Manhattan. Hernandez has become as famous for his Shrimp Beggar's Purses and Tuna Provencale as he is for the quesadillas and award-winning burgers. Appetizers range from \$4.25 to \$9.95 and entrees are \$7.95 to \$27.95.

The MacLeans know that food is only part of the appeal.

"We designed the Circus Café to be very visual," Colin said. "We created a mood and ambience through color and scenery."

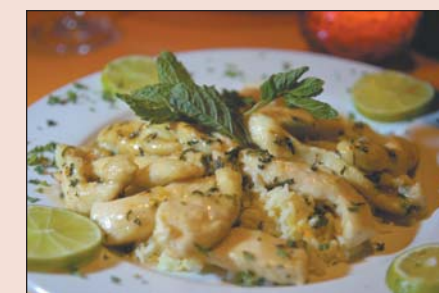
"What we want is for people to feel entertained when they come here," Christel said. "And customers tell us they are." 

Mojito Chicken

Ingredients:
 2 lbs chicken (four 8-ounce breasts)
 2 tablespoons butter
 1 teaspoon garlic
 1/4 cup chopped fresh mint
 1/4 cup rum
 1/2 cup Rose's lime juice
 2 tablespoons brown sugar
 1/4 cup flour to lightly dredge chicken
 Fresh sprigs of mint (to garnish each plate)
 Fresh lime cut in half (to garnish each plate)

Instructions:
 Cut chicken breasts into strips, and dredge in flour.
 Saute chicken strips in butter until lightly browned. Add garlic to

chicken and cook until also lightly browned.
 Carefully deglaze with rum; then add lime juice, mint and brown sugar.
 Cook until sauce thickens or until about half is reduced.
 Serve chicken over rice, and drizzle with sauce.
 Garnish each plate with fresh mint and lime.



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